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Jean-Pierre Boulé and Enda McCaffrey, eds., *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011. viii + 200 pp. Notes. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-85745-320-4.

Review by Margaret Attack, University of Leeds, UK.

« Dans l'inconfort égalitaire des salles de quartier, j'avais appris que ce nouvel art était à moi, comme à tous. Nous étions du même âge mental : j'avais sept ans et je savais lire, il en avait douze et ne savait pas parler. On disait qu'il était à ses débuts, qu'il avait des progrès à faire ; je pensais que nous grandirions ensemble. Je n'ai pas oublié notre enfance commune. » [1] Thus Sartre famously pointed to the special relationship that his generation had with the cinema, and film is a constant thread in his life and work. He wrote about it, he wrote several screenplays, many of his works were filmed, and towards the end of his life he was the subject of a film. His interventions were occasional and never developed into any overarching film theory, to the regret of some; indeed Contat and Rybalka suggest that many considered him rather old-fashioned on the subject, never really getting to grips with the specificity of film.[2] However, there are many fascinating insights in the prize-day speech on cinema he gave in 1931: the clandestine article of 1944 on cinema as a collective art; the article on *Citizen Kane* which was the springboard for André Bazin's very famous analysis published in *les Temps modernes*; the intriguing comparison between theatre and cinema which denies to cinema the structure of otherness that is fundamental to his vision of theatre and indeed the novel, suggesting the possibility of a very different aesthetic.[3]

The aim of this collection is not to explore a Sartrean analysis of film as such, but to examine a variety of contemporary films, the majority appearing after 2000, using Sartrean concepts. The relationship between philosophy and film has now a long history. Dudley Andrew has described the excitement generated by Bazin's lectures in the mid-1940s offering a serious reading of film as a reflection on the human condition and doing philosophy through film.[4] Different emphases can be applied: exploring films through a conceptual framework, pursuing philosophical reflection and understanding of the nature of film; seeing film as a demonstration of philosophical concepts or approaches. All three are to be found at various points in this collection.

To give a unifying focus to the volume, the contributors were asked to read *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, the text of the lecture Sartre gave in 1946 at the height of a media frenzy for existentialism. The introduction sets out the context and rationale for this approach, presenting existentialism as a philosophy that emerges after war, peaks in the late 1940s, is challenged by structuralism, and re-emerges in 1968. In terms of intellectual history, this is one particular chronological narrative which tends to efface other chronologies, for example the importance and high profile of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and *Les Temps modernes*, culturally and politically, through the 1950s, culminating in the spurned award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964. Concentrating on the 1940s also underplays the importance of his earlier texts, *L'Imagination* and especially *L'Imaginaire*, which have been so influential in film and visual cultural theory.[5]

Sartre's lecture is primarily a defence against misreadings that present existentialism as a sordid philosophy of despair or petit bourgeois self-indulgence. It has never been admired by specialists[6], and Sartre himself was always uncomfortable about it. Contat and Rybalka sum up a widespread view: "Centré principalement sur le problème moral, il vulgarise, au prix de simplifications qui les travestissent en une sorte de moralisme, les thèses saillantes de l'existentialisme." [7] While pragmatically this choice of text works well, in providing a set of common concerns which all the contributors address and in clearly focusing on some of existentialism's primary concepts, philosophically it compounds a particular reading reinforcing the individualism of choice.

The interpretation of existentialism in this volume is largely focused on the individual with Sartre often presented as if in dialogue with Descartes. The complexities of the phenomenological subject, the non-coincidence of the self to the self, are frequently displaced in favour of a "sovereign individual" (pp. 2, 21) who is "free to choose as they wish," (p. 50) where "freedom" is virtually indistinguishable from free will. What has been left out of the lecture and indeed of many accounts of Sartre are intentionality and a rigorous understanding of the foundational nature of situation and otherness to the self. Sartre tries to hammer home even in the lecture the dangers of reading existentialism as individual subjectivism, a variant on Gide's *acte gratuit*. We are condemned to choose, in a situation not of our choosing, that is furthermore structuring our possible choices, and we are absolutely responsible for the actions we take and their outcomes. Freedom is the context in which that statement makes sense. As Merleau-Ponty says, the relation between the self and the world is a "*rapport d'être* selon lequel le sujet *est* son corps, son monde et sa situation"; "nous ne sommes pas esprit *et* corps, conscience *en face du* monde, mais esprit incarné, être-au-monde." [8] The moment of choice is anguished because of the lonely responsibility involved in making a decision with no guarantees, a decision moreover that lays down a law for humanity. As Sartre was still saying nearly twenty years later, "Tout homme est tout l'homme." [9]. The first reservation then concerns the tendency across the volume to present freedom as a property of the self that the self exercises within the constraints of a situation.

The second caveat concerns the notion of a radical division between the Sartre of the early works and the later Sartre who has "discovered" Marxism. As the discussion with Pierre Naville after the lecture and Sartre's earlier "Mise au point" both show, dialogue with (an admittedly unsubtle) Marxism was well engaged at the time. [10] Sartre's early critique of Marxism was that it was a metaphysical materialism, finding there precisely what he detects in *Citizen Kane*, and, obliquely, in *L'Etranger*: the outcomes are determined by the structures from the start. But while Sartre certainly acknowledged that the theorisation of history and politics was grossly underdeveloped in his early texts, that does not mean the subject was previously an autonomous entity. Indeed, the starting problematic of *La Critique de la raison dialectique* was to reconcile existentialism, a philosophy of freedom, with Marxism. [11]

Within this common framework, the essays take an immensely varied range of approaches and perspectives on their chosen films which themselves are a heterogeneous bunch. They are grouped into two parts, "The Call for Freedom" and "Films of Situation," a dichotomy which also works to reinforce the conception of a free individual in a context, whereas Sartre's definition of *un théâtre de situations* was precisely an aesthetic grounded in "des libertés qui se choisissent." [12] Most analyses are thematic, focusing on the development of character, behaviour and plot, but the specificity of image, shot and soundtrack is not neglected. The introduction presents the second half of the book as focused on a situation in more concrete ways than the first, more theoretical half, although in practice it is not easy to discern any difference in the way they engage with the detail of the films in question.

Christopher Falzon reads *The Truman Show* (1998) as an "affirmation of individual freedom in the face of external influences", comparing Truman Burbank to *La Nausée's* Antoine Roquentin as two characters enacting a "Cartesian questioning of their situation." [13] Freedom in this essay is moral and psychological, as Truman's gradual realisation of his captivity and life as an object of a universal gaze is replaced by his rebellion; Falzon rightly argues that Truman's escape from the show cannot be read as a

parable of existentialism because situation has a structural role in Sartre's philosophy and cannot be shrugged off, and also highlights the role of the other, stressing here the other as threat. He also explores Sartre's attitude to God in parallel with the character of Christof, the show's creator.

Kevin Stoehr focuses on inauthenticity, indifference and nihilism in the films of Michael Haneke, with characters who fail to confront truthfully their situations, maintaining a more or less comfortable status quo which, in *Caché* (2005) for example, gradually unravels. Charting the nihilistic horror of the violence with which lives are often destroyed, or self-destruct, in Haneke's films, Stoehr develops a contrast between a life-negating freedom and a life-affirming freedom. Mark Stanton also examines inauthenticity, alienation and bad faith in his discussion of Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), but the accent here is on the clash between freedom and conformity. Stanton looks in detail at social roles, particularly gender and the construction of masculinity as played out in the contrasts between Johnny, Jeremy and Brian. Masculinity must be chosen, and a detailed analysis is given of the behaviour, attitudes and character of each and the construction of their sense of masculine power in their violent objectification of women. He also takes the dynamics of the gaze beyond the screen, arguing that the film's audience and its accusatory gaze have a role in the construction of the meaning of the film.

Tom Martin develops the presentation of freedom in situation and bad faith in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), directed by the Coen brothers. Martin offers a close reading of the themes of air and water in the film, tracing a relationship between Ed's pursuit of the dream of owning a dry-cleaning firm and his wish to escape the hair, dirt and soapy water of his current existence, in what Martin describes as a contrast of immanence and transcendence. In this narrative of missed opportunities, misunderstandings and sad disappointments, Martin convincingly shows that Ed acquires the status of existential hero as he quietly faces up to his end.

Starting with Luc Dardenne's interest in philosophy through his notes on Pascal, Sartre and Levinas, Sarah Cooper analyses the Dardenne brothers' *Lorna's Silence* (2008) in order to highlight the importance of existential solitude. In a bleak film of oppressive and exploitative sexual relations and violence, Cooper stresses the optimism and potential for change inscribed in existentialism, and how the film's ambiguous ending may encompass the possible dream of a more authentic future.

In her discussion of Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), in the first essay of the second part of the volume, Michelle Darnell focuses on language and meaning, drawing directly on Sartre's writings on cinema, and also working systemically through the key concepts of abandonment, despair, anguish, and action. Bob and Charlotte are constructing themselves through language and cultural roles, but each is trapped in inauthenticity in their relationships and attitude to life; each is struggling towards greater understanding and acknowledgement of responsibility.

Tracey Nicholls engages directly with the politics of Northern Ireland and the role of the other in *The Crying Game* (1992), directed by Neil Jordan. The construction of the enemy as "other" enables the exploration of political and national identities, as British soldier and IRA member confront each other. Gendered identities and emotional ties complicate further the destabilising of the fixed ideas, perceptions and roles for the four central characters. Nicholls demonstrates the anti-essentialist stance of the film and argues it underlines the possibility of conscious agency and change.

Enda McCaffrey analyses the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007) in order to ask both "is existentialism still relevant?" and "can films philosophise?" (p. 125). With the landscape of West Texas physically embodying the insignificance and nothingness of life, he situates the three main characters in relation to chance, free will and fate, arguing that existentialism allows us to articulate the universality of being with specific situations. From a discussion of the passionate character, rather than the bad faith, of Hugo in Sartre's play, *Les Mains sales*, and Hilbert in his short story, *Erostrate*, McCaffrey charts the

extreme nature of the situation set up in the film, and the implication of the differing responses of each of the protagonists for our understanding of values, and of authentic and inauthentic action in the world.

Patrick Williams tackles directly the poor reputation of *Existentialisme est un humanisme* [14] and also the perceived gap between early and later Sartre, stressing rather the continuity of Sartre's thought, in his analysis of Ousmane Sembene's film, *Mooladé* (2004), a story of resistance to patriarchy and rebellion against genital mutilation. Stressing Sembene's commitment to the portrayal of the heroism of everyday life, Williams evaluates the role of the character Mercenaire as representation of otherness and therefore self-knowledge to the community. Situating the rebellion within a wider discourse of tradition opposed to modernity, Williams includes a consideration of the aesthetic of politically committed art.

Jean-Pierre Boulé offers a reading of Cédric Klapisch's *L'Auberge espagnole* (2002) and its sequel *Les Poupées russes* (2005) in parallel with *La Nausée*, organised around key Sartrean concepts such as freedom, commitment, or the project, finding many points of convergence in, for example, the treatment of the bourgeoisie, the physical embodiment of existential distress, or the reflection on narrative and the ordering inherent in story-telling. Arguing that the viewers are invited to participate in the films' critique of conventional myths of career or romance, Boulé identifies a positive outcome consonant with Sartre's view of committed literature.

In the final essay, Alistair Rolls takes what seems like an oblique route to the interconnectedness of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *La Nausée* in concentrating upon the song *Some of these days*, but uses it—or rather the very little-known words which connect in interesting ways with the plot of the novel—to unpick the multiple layers of modernity, Paris and Shakespeare in the film. Drawing on the structure of “it is what it is not, it is not what it is” that recurs so often in *L'Être et le néant*, he discusses adaptation, inversion and cross-over, and the permeability of contours.[15]

Has the book achieved its aim of “revalidating the Sartrean project through its application to film”, (p. 1), or that of meeting the needs of “students seeking to apply existentialism to film” (p. 6)? As someone who teaches both French cinema and existentialism courses, I would expect students of existentialism in particular to be enthusiastic about discussing this intersection of familiar concepts and such recent films. The essays are thoughtful, informed and illuminating. While some of the interpretations of the philosophy, and at times of Sartre's imaginative texts, may be unorthodox, students and scholars will find much here with which to reflect and engage. Collectively, they certainly demonstrate the richness of an existentialist interrogation of meaning and purposefulness of action in the world, and the extent to which contemporary cinema continues to prove fertile material for philosophical enquiry.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

### Part One. The Call to Freedom

Jean-Pierre Boulé and Enda McCaffrey, “Introduction”

Christopher Falzon, “Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* and Sartrean Freedom”

Kevin L. Stoehr, “Michael Haneke and the Consequences of Radical Freedom”

Mark Stanton, “*Naked*, Bad Faith and Masculinity”

Tom Martin, “Pursuits of Transcendence in *The Man Who Wasn't There*”

Sarah Cooper, “*Lorna's Silence*: Sartre and the Dardenne Brothers”

## Part Two. Films of Situation

Michelle R. Darnell, "Being—*Lost in Translation*"

Tracey Nicholls, "If I Should Wake Before I Die: Existentialism as a Political Call to Arms in *The Crying Game*"

Enda McCaffrey, "Crimes of Passion, Freedom and a Clash of Sartrean Moralities in the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men*"

Patrick Williams, "'An Act of Confidence in the Freedom of Men': Jean-Paul Sartre and Ousmane Sembene"

Jean-Pierre Boulé, "Cédric Klapisch's *The Spanish Apartment* and *Russian Dolls* in *Nausea's* Mirror"

Alistair Rolls, "Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*: The Nauseous Art of Adaptation"

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p.100.

[2] See Dominique Chateau, *Sartre et le cinéma* (Biarritz and Paris: Atlantica-Séguier, 2005), pp. 9-10, and Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., *Les Ecrits de Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 483.

[3] "L'Art cinématographique" (1931), reproduced in *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, pp. 546-552; no author, "Un film pour l'après-guerre," *Les Lettres françaises* (April 1944): 3-4; "Quand Hollywood veut faire penser...*Citizen Kane* d'Orson Welles," *L'Ecran français* 5/1(August 1945); André Bazin, "La Technique de *Citizen Kane*," *Les Temps modernes* 17(1947):943-949; "Théâtre et cinéma," in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., *Un théâtre de situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 85-90.

[4] Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 87-88, 129.

[5] See Andrew, *André Bazin*, pp. 70-80, for the importance of *L'imaginaire* for André Bazin, and Chateau, *Sartre et le cinéma*, p. 11, quoting Antoine de Baecque on his importance for the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics generally. His wider importance for theories of visual culture is apparent in Roland Barthes' dedication of *La Chambre claire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979): "En hommage à l'*Imaginaire* de Sartre."

[6] As Patrick Williams also points out in this volume, p. 143.

[7] Contat and Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, p. 132. Its "un-nuanced moral dimension" is mentioned also in the introduction to this volume, p. 2.

[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1948), pp. 144, 148 respectively, original emphasis in both.

[9] Sartre, *Les Mots*, p. 54.

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[10] Discussion with Naville in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1967), pp. 97-141; "A propos de l'existentialisme: mise au point," first published in *Action* in 1944, reproduced in Contat and Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, pp. 653-658.

[11] Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Un théâtre de situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 20.

[13] Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1938).

[14] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1946).

[15] Jean-Paul Sartre, *l'Être et le néant* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1943).

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